DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 254 FL 008 428

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TITLE When [+Native] Is [-Favorable]. Lektos: Interdisciplinary Working Papers in Language Sciences, Special Issue.
INSTITUTION Louisville Univ., Ky. Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics.
PUB DATE Dec 76
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the convention of the Modern Language Association (New York, New York, December 26-30, 1976). For related documents, see FL 008 427-430
AVAILABLE FROM University of Louisville, Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics, Room 214 Humanities, Louisville, Kentucky 40208 ($2.00 for the issue)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American English; Communicative Competence (Languages); Dialect Studies; *English (Second Language); Instructional Materials; *Language Attitudes; *Language Instruction; Language Styles; Language Teachers; Language Usage; Language Variation; *Native Speakers; *Regional Dialects; *Second Language Learning; Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for foreign language students to develop positive attitudes about regional and social dialect variation, while learning dialectal patterns that will best facilitate their widest acceptance into a community of target language speakers. The latter issue was tested in a study in which native speakers of American English rated voices according to personality traits. Two of the four diagnostic voices were native speakers of American English, one with no pronounced regional or class grammatical markers, the other with strong east-Texas pronunciation and accompanying grammatical markers. Two other voices were both native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, one devoid of American English regional markers and the other having them. By far the greatest number of negative evaluations went to the Jordanian Arabic speaker who used many American English regionalisms. In order to develop linguistically defensible attitudes in their students, language teachers must be familiar with regional markers. Methods to develop sensitivity to language variation include using novels and other popular reading materials, having the students bring their own examples, and having students paraphrase examples as an exercise in style-shifting. (Author/CLK)

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WHEN [+NATIVE] IS [-FAVORABLE]

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The most difficult thing for the foreign language student is the acquisition of language sensitivity of the sort that allows him to make appropriate judgements about regionalisms and register. And, this Sprachgefühl is essential to true mastery of a serviceable foreign language. The task of the linguistically sophisticated foreign language instructor is bifurcated in a most awkward way in that we must simultaneously strive to develop good attitudes of dialect tolerance in our students while guiding them into dialectal patterns that will best facilitate their widest acceptance into a community of target language speakers.

It is true that while we linguists and sociolinguists know that there is no such thing as an intrinsically superior (or, for that matter, inferior) dialect, the world is peopled with speakers of quite another mind. The picture is further complicated by the fact that the native speaker is quite ready to reject from the foreign speaker exactly those regional markers he personally identifies with in his own speech.

In a Texas study using native speakers of American English, a number of voices were presented. Of the sample, four voices provided the test material while the others served as detractors. Two of the four were native speakers, one used general midland, network-standard type, speech with no pronounced regional or class grammatical markers. The other had a strong east-Texas pronunciation and employed such regional markers as multiple modals, "ya'll", and absence of adjectival morphemes. To this pair two with foreign speech were added (both were native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, a language calcuilted to be unfamiliar enough to not have built-in stigma). One speech sample was devoid of easily recognizable regional markers although it was clearly a foreigner speaking American (not British) English. The other voice, while every bit as foreign--spoke with a number of Texas regional markers.

Each of the four men was then evaluated according to personality traits. The content of the "speech samples" was kept constant. The two native speakers rate about equal in the number of positive traits attributed to them. The one with regionalisms received slightly higher marks for trustworthiness and slightly lower for leadership, but on the whole, the two were comparable. Of the two foreign speakers, by far the greatest number of negative evaluations went to the man with the heavy use of regionalisms. He was judged

to have little education, to have little sense of humor, to be untrustworthy, and to be poorly informed. This supports the assertion already presented to this body that we feel uncomfortable when the foreign speaker too closely approximates our own dialect.

If my analysis is correct, what linguistically and pedagogically justifiable goals can we set for students who are in the process of acquiring a good competence in a target language? I propose several. First of all, on an intellectual level, instructors must work to develop linguistically defensible attitudes in their students. Pragmatically, instructors must alert their students to the pitfalls of becoming "too native". In order to do this, the instructor must be thoroughly familiar with the markers of regionalism and those of the more neutral variety.

As instructors we are committed to familiarizing our students with linguistic truths, one of which is that no language or dialect is intrinsically superior. This is not always easy, for students come to us with thoroughly solidified prejudices about their own languages and dialects. In the case of E.S.L. students, their attitudes about language are often rooted in history. Some are the direct result of former colonialism, others stem from the national jingoism of an emerging state in the process of developing a national identity, while still others are founded on religious teachings hundreds and thousands of years old.

It is the word "intrinsic" in the statement "No language or dialect is intrinsically superior or inferior" that makes the concept at all paletable to most students. Language students know intuitively what the study just presented proves: that some dialects are more socially prized or stigamatized than others. What they do not know is that a double standard exists here. Certain dialectal markers may be perfectly acceptable even advantageous when coming from a native speaker but be quite offensive when spoken by a foreigner.

The rule seems to be that the foreigner must strive for native ability without approximating that goal too closely. Students must be warned that this attitude exists. Here, linguistically trained instructors are particularly valuable in that they have the scholarly training to identify dialectal regionalisms and, at the same time, they reconcile good linguistic philosophy with the seemingly contradictory reactions of the community of speakers. The problem is paradoxically more severe in the teaching situation in which the student lives in a community of target-language speakers. In other words, the more native speakers he confronts, the more apt he is to pick up offensive habits, a situation exactly contrary to what we have

always assumed was the case, for we formerly believed that any markers of nativeness were better than merely foreign influences. There are several specifics the instructor might use to help the student develop Sprachgefühl.

The task of raising student consciousness about their reception by target language speakers when they fall into suprisingly native patterns requires great sensitivity. While, without exception students come to foreign language courses with a rigid set of their own prejudices about language varieties and language users, they are often shocked to find out that they too might be able to offend. Students must first be urged to identify vocabulary and syntax by register and region and then to realize that, as foreign speakers, they have less latitude than native speakers do in their choice of a language variety.

At the English Language Institute we use novels and other popular materials to improve reading speed and enrich vocabulary, and we have discovered that we can also use these popular readings for demonstrating class and regional markers. When McMurtry writes, "I never said nothin' of the sort, but I might could've thought it" we have a basis for a good discussion of regional syntactic structures and of double negation.

Another device we use is to have students bring in items they have heard that puzzle them, both the item (usually a sentence) and its social context (where they heard it and who said it). A troublesome speech sample such as "Hell, I was drivin' as slow and careful as I could" is a good starting place to point out--first--the impact of the taboo word and--second--the adverb/adjective confusion shown by many native speakers.

Parapharase, too, is a good means of raising student consciousness about dialectal patterns that may stigmatize them among linguistically uninformed audiences. For example, when Peter Benchley has Quint, a rough and lawless fisherman, say "He ain't done it", it is fruitful to have students say how they imagine another character, say Matt the Hyannis Port ichthyologist, could have expressed the same thing. Students respond well to this sort of dialect-shift exercise.

Once the students become actively aware of the regional and register markers and the taboo words it is a fairly easy task to encourage them to use only those varieties that work to their own best advantage.

Of course, to be able to make judgements about the regionality of an item, the instructor must be well versed in the ethnography of speaking, in dialectology, and in sociolinguistics. By "judgements" is meant sensitivity to the appropriateness of language.

Instructors must be willing to invest the time and scholarship to familiarize themselves not merely with variety markers, but also with the reactions of the target language community to foreign speakers with some native items in their speech. Here, the present research is both scant and impressionistic; more is needed.

In the interim, however, we must change our way of thinking about the languages we teach. They are not merely abstract grammars from which all derived speech varieties are equally acceptable. Rather, they are living, human codes that cause people to respond as much to what is said as to how it is phrased.